### “Many Lepers” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Jan. 30, 2022

**Jeremiah 1:4–10**

4Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” 6Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” 7But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” 9Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. 10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

**Luke 4:21–30**

21Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” 22All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” 23He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” 24And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town. 25But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; 26yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” 28When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. 30But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

One thing in common between these two readings is the *power* of prophecy. It is dangerously and frighteningly powerful. Jeremiah is a remarkable prophet in that he shows you his inner life more than any other prophet. Here he shows you his lack of confidence; “I’m only a boy,” he says. But God has confidence in him; he’ll be able to speak; God will put his words in his mouth.

Jeremiah will argue with God, as in chap. 12, where he asks why “the guilty prosper” (12:1). He complains about being persecuted (15:15–20; 20:7–18), but he trusts God will deliver him (15:20; 20:11–13). Jeremiah will express sorrow and despair, but always keeps the lines of conversation open. He has lots of compassion for his fellow countrymen (31:20; 42:12), even when they are foolish. Jesus resonates with the compassionate and passionate Jeremiah, but the story he tells in today’s Scripture refers to some other prophets, popular favorites Elijah and Elishah, who often ministered to rural folks. Jesus has just finished addressing the folks gathered at the synagogue in Nazareth. He has read the stunning prophecy from Isaiah 61, adding a clause from Isaiah 35. He read “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19), and then, astonishingly, he closes the scroll and says “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21).

This blows their minds. But they’re thinking, “why don’t you work some miracle here, as you did in Capernaum? Why don’t you help to make us famous?” Jesus is not happy with this attitude, so he says something that *really* shocks them. He offends their national pride by his saying that there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, but the prophet was sent to none except to a widow in Sidon, presumably a Phoenician. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elijah’s successor, Elishah, but he healed none except Naaman the Syrian.

Luke doesn’t give us any dialogue after that, just the brute narrative facts. The people boil over with nationalistic pride and rage and take Jesus to the edge of a cliff, preparing to throwing him off. But his time has not yet come, and he turns and walks away from them without another word.

What might be the equivalent to Jesus’ remarks in our culture? It might be as if someone said “there were many hungry people in Texas during the time of Davy Crockett, but God didn’t feed any of them except a certain Seňor Fernandez. And there were many crippled people in Massachusetts in the time of John Adams, but God didn’t heal any of them except a Native American named Pokanotamwe.” You can imagine how some nationalistic folks might be aggravated by such a remark. And people were very intense about their loyalties back then.

An important part of Jesus’ mission was to get people to overcome their ethnic prejudices. There are other times when he shocked people, as when he said, regarding a Roman soldier, “Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith” (Matt 8:10). And he surprised them by ministering to a Syro-phoenician woman and to a Samaritan woman, and rebuking James and John for wanting to call down fire upon a Samaritan village (Luke 9:52–55).

You can imagine that Jesus wanted to make a good impression during the inaugural announcement of his mission. He would not have brought up the issue of foreigners unless it were an essential part of his message. Evidently, it *was* essential to his mission to point out that foreigners are included in God’s grace. Throughout the New Testament, it is made clear that the gospel is meant “to bring salvation to the ends of the earth’” (Acts 13:47). We are to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). A few chapters after Jesus’ initial announcement, we see him preaching to people who came from Tyre and Sidon (Luke 6:17). It is the Apostle Paul who later organizes these Gentiles into churches, but Jesus had already been preaching and ministering to them.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus talks with a Samaritan woman, tells her about the need to worship God in spirit and in truth (4:24), and when she mentions the Messiah, he says “I am he” (4:25–26), the first time he says that to anybody. She then proceeds to talk all about him to the people of Samaria, “and many more believed” (4:41). In the very next story in John, he heals the son of a Roman official (4:46–54). Some chapters later, some Greeks come to see Jesus (8:20–22).

It still is a message for us, that God invites all peoples into the kingdom. We need to maintain an open and inviting attitude toward people who come from other cultures or other ethnic groups than our own. Western Christians could read up and learn about African Christians, Chinese Christians, and Arab Christians, who number in the millions. As the song says, “be they yellow, black, or white, they are precious in his sight.” This was such an important part of Jesus’ message that he allowed it to wreck the publicity value of the initial announcement of his mission. If people were not open to the idea of God’s love for a Phoenician widow and a Syrian leper, they were not ready for Jesus’ message at all. This is also a message of openness to all widows and lepers, all the people shoved aside by society, the poor and the disfigured. They are welcome at Christ’s table. Let *us* be welcoming to all, so that our table may be Christ’s table.